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Festival of the Nativity of Our Lord One and Three Year Series 2016

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Christmas Preaching

Preaching on Christmas is always a bit of a challenge and a mystery to me. No one comes expecting to hear something new, and yet the Churches of our land will be full. This culture which is almost obsessed with the latest and the newest suddenly finds itself gathered around one of the oldest stories of humanity, listening to words that were written two thousand years ago, probably the oldest words some of these people will hear all year. And don't change them. They will be mad.

What do you say on such a day? The feast seems to speak for itself. Our words run the serious risk of diminishing the story in all its simple beauty. A virgin has a baby, and that babe is the very Lord of heaven and earth come down to save mankind.

This is not the moment for humor nor excessive sobriety. Jokes do not cut it, nor would the tirade on abortion which my predecessor preached in one of my prior congregations and which the folks were still talking about years later. This is a time to celebrate and our culture struggles to articulate celebration as a community. We are not used to the encomium nor the laudatory praise. When we gather for a celebration of a person, we are apt to roast them, but that hardly seems appropriate here. We are looking for the right blend of holy joy and serious fun. We come to a moment of holy mirth and joy; there is something to be said for some silence and also a word of simple praise. The story speaks for itself and the preacher might well use silence to emphasize it. Yet, there is a proclamatory opportunity here. One of my colleagues used to say, "If they are only going to come to church twice a year, Christmas and Easter are about their best options." He was right. They are coming back to their home town to pay their taxes, put their offering in. Like salmon returning to the same gravel bed where they were spawned, the children return to their families. The same incredible miracle is happening. Life itself, the Gospel comes to us. It is time to rejoice that they are here because the news is so good. Our sermons will need to reflect that good news for all people.

The message belongs in the starkest of terms. God has come to save the world. It is important to lose the Advent vocabulary of "will happen" or "promise to." Now it is time to speak in the bold indicative which is most natural for the Gospel. Jesus is born. Salvation has come. We speak of promises fulfilled and gifts already given. Now is the time to speak of a peace that obtains because Christ has come, not some far away peace. That is what Advent is for. This is Christmas, time to celebrate the gift of God's only Son, conceived by the Spirit, born of the Virgin, who has born the sins of the world on his back and dealt with them once and for all.

The season itself, with its gift giving, with its lights, its feasting, and its family time, is replete with the illustration one needs. Perhaps the greatest message to give to those who are exhausted coming to this night is to speak of Christ taking up the burden of mankind. I really believe that if Jesus were to come today, he would not speak of food so much. He spoke those years ago to a

culture that lived a perpetual protein deficit, but our refrigerators are full. This is only more so in this season as our tables groan under the burden of all the food we load upon them and our belts are let loose a notch after all the parties and feasting. I think were Jesus standing in the middle of our cities preaching today, he would speak to this culture about rest. There is one burden he has born, a burden far too heavy for us.

There are four sets of readings appointed for Christmas. This used to be three sets of readings and that seems to come from the ancient celebrations in Jerusalem, but we are not sure. The best reconstruction we can make of it is that the faithful gathered at the Grotto of the Nativity for a midnight service. They then processed by torchlight to the great church of the resurrection in Jerusalem, meeting there shortly before dawn. (This seems to be one of the roots of our Christmas Eve Candlelight services, often held at midnight.) They would gather for a dawn service, disperse to their homes and return for a third service in the church of the Resurrection. What is also possible is that this is a medieval invention as well. Don't put too many theological eggs in that basket.

This is why there are three readings appointed for Christmas – at least we think so. I must admit I am not sure why there are four. Much of this is open to some interpretation, but it makes the most sense of it. Our pericope has noted that the traditions here have changed but in LSB has elected to retain these four sets of readings, Christmas Eve, Christmas Midnight, Christmas Dawn and The Feast of the Incarnation. Most of us have a Christmas Eve and some then return for a Christmas Midnight service and some have a Christmas Morning service. I would be surprised to hear that any of you are doing a Christmas Dawn, but if so, let me know.

Of course, the best resource on the history and the events of the nativity is still Maier's *In the Fullness of Time*. If you have never read that, I encourage you to pick it up and read through his section on the Christmas story. It will keep you from some embarrassing errors in sermons throughout this season.

The Nativity of our Lord – Christmas Eve

Collect

You make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of Your only-begotten son, Jesus Christ. Grant that as we joyfully receive Him as our Redeemer, we may with sure confidence behold Him when He comes to be our Judge; through the same Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Notice the turn to judgment here. The first and the second coming are always intricately tied together. But so too is the good news. The judge who returns has holes in his hands and feet where he died to pay the penalty for my sin. His judgment will essentially be rendered on his own work. A judge determines punishment, remember. Will Jesus simply look at his hands and smile at me and say "Looks good enough to me, how about you?" it might be too trite of a picture, but

it has the essentials. This is the source of our confidence upon that last day which the world fears so much.

Isaiah 7:10-14 (A virgin will conceive and bear a son)

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: ¹¹ “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” ¹² But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.” ¹³ And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

The Savior is promised and we celebrate the delivery of this promise. Even though a critical reading of this text would not necessarily lead one to conclude that this is a messianic text. At the time of its utterance, the text looks to be addressing geopolitical realities of the 8th century BC. In the stress of a siege and the grim outlook which confronted Ahaz as he looked out over the armies which surrounded his city, the promise of a baby born some 700 years in the future would have hardly been construed as good news. But Christians have always, from the days of Matthew’s Gospel account, said that this virgin giving birth was Mary, the descendent of David, the mother of Jesus, and the child she bore was the incarnate Son of God. He is Immanuel. Interestingly, this title does not ever seem to have been spoken of Jesus in his adult life and yet even though he does not seem to have born the name, his whole life is a living out of this reality as he walks on water, heals the sick, casts out the demons, and finally rises from the dead. He is God among us.

A look at the structure of Matthew shows this reality of Christ being God among us showing up in two important “hinge” moments in the gospel account itself. Chapter 18 is the very important discourse on forgiveness. There Jesus says that wherever just two or three gather in his name “I with them am” in literally translated Greek. He repeats the same sentiment in the great commission at the end of the Gospel, in fact the last words of the text are “I with you am until the end of the age.” Same strange construction which is odd in Greek too, so odd that it would have stood out for a Greek hearer.

As we gather to celebrate the birth of Immanuel, God with us, Matthew has in mind two places for us to notice the presence of Christ. The first is in the essential act of the community – the forgiveness of sins. God is with us in sacrament and Christian fellowship, as the hurts and the sins of the past are laid at the feet of the cross. The second place to notice Immanuel’s presence is in the mission enterprise. He is with us whenever we speak of his love to a neighbor or a friend or a family member. We tend to find the presence of Christ in the moments of drama and tension in our lives, but in truth, Matthew wants us to see Him in the very mundane and the regular things we do as we live our Christian lives, forgiving and speaking with each other and the world around us.

Sermon Idea: Immanuel – God’s answer to all our prayers (That the hearer would see in this babe of Bethlehem, this man of Calvary, this triumphant Lord of Life in Easter the answer to all their problems)

Young king Ahaz was looking for something else. The weight of responsibility hung heavily upon his youthful shoulders. He was only 21. We would barely let him buy a drink in a bar. His city was besieged, his nation teetered on the brink of disaster. Along comes his cousin the prophet (we think Isaiah was a member of the royal family – just look at the access he has to Ahaz here.) This may not have been terribly welcome for prophets have a way of making themselves unwelcome houseguests. Ahaz is at work, inspecting the defenses which have to hold or the city falls. Isaiah confronts him and urges him to ask for a sign. Piously, of perhaps just to be rid of this irksome distraction, Ahaz refuses to put God to the test and Isaiah gets testy with him. He will get a sign of God’s redemption, a child born.

For Ahaz this probably sounded ludicrous. The city was in danger of falling and Isaiah could only point to a young woman standing nearby and tell him that she would conceive, bear a son, and name him “God with us.” He would eat curds because there would be enough milk to curdle. He would eat honey that came from fields and pastures which surrounded the city of Jerusalem. Right now everyone was on short rations and could not leave the city.

We look out over our world and see many things that worry us and give us anxiety. But like poor king Ahaz God directs our attention tonight to a child, a babe, the first born of a young woman, Mary of Nazareth, the betrothed of Joseph the Carpenter. It is humble and does not look like much. It certainly does not look like the solution to this world’s problems. But listen and watch closely. You will hear angelic choirs welcoming this child. A star notes his birth and wise men from the east are making their way to worship at his feet. The local potentate hears these signs and will react with bloody fury, but the child will be spared to grow into a man. The sick, lame and dying will flock to him. The demons will obey his command to leave and even the dead will rise.

Finally, in a cataclysm of injustice and justice all rolled into one horrific event, he will die unjustly and bring righteousness to the world. His victory will be proclaimed in Easter and Ascension.

But now, cast your eyes on this child. He is the strange and paradoxical answer which God has for all that ails you.

Psalm 110:1-4

¹ The LORD says to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.”

² The LORD sends forth from Zion

your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your enemies!

³ Your people will offer themselves freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;
from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be yours.

⁴ The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek.”

I John 4:7-16

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

The essence of God which is present in that manger is love. It came into the world and now it has come into us and that love has become the mark which distinguishes us. That is a statement of both law and gospel in itself. No human being can hear that and not think of the times when his or her life has not lived up to that ideal of which John speaks today.

But at the same time, the message is not that God loves the lovely or the ones who get this right, the message is that he loves. Period. He just loves. That love has within it the power to transform even the most hardened of sinners and in that love we are given the ability, the opportunity to participate most intimately in the divine.

For the modern hearer, there is something really interesting here. We live in an epistemologically stunted age. We think that the route to true knowledge is to stick something in a laboratory, to scrutinize and observe and measure and conduct controlled experiments. This is a great way to study what the ancients would have called an efficient cause or what we might better understand as a how question. How does a flower grow? How does our body metabolize all the calories we will eat at Grandma's house on Christmas Day? But the lab is a terrible way to answer questions of "Why?" and "Should we?" or "Where did it all come from?" John tells us that no one has ever seen God, no one can objectify God. He defies such scrutiny. But in love, we encounter and experience God in a way that is much more thorough and beautiful and

intimate than any laboratory is able to achieve. He abides in us and we abide in him and his love is “perfected” in us. That perfected word would make a great sermon. God’s love finds its perfection, another step toward its final and total end, in my words spoken to my sister or brother in Christ. That perfection will finally be realized on the last, day yes, but this Christmastide is the time to note that every little loving deed is a gift from God and a sign of his love to me. I know God in these things. I know his love for me, I know his will, I simply know him in love. The more love has its way with me, the more I know God.

Sermon Theme: Love Came Down at Christmastime (That the hearer would rejoice in the presence of God’s love in his/her life and be moved to love more and thus to know God the better.) There is a funny thing about all of us gathered here tonight. All around the world churches are brimming full of people, including some folks who aren’t here on a regular basis. There are more folks singing carols tonight and holding candles and in church than were out on the streets for the latest Climate Summit or even when Obama was elected. What makes this such an odd thing is that none of this is “news.” If this many people were to gather for a protest it would be on national news and governments might fall, but the world looks at all of us here and shrugs its collective shoulders.

It’s not like we are all tuned into some breaking events in the world’s story. This story is two thousand years old. And yet we come to hear the same words, sing the old carols, give the old Christmas greetings and conduct family and community rituals that are so old we don’t even know why we do them anymore. So, just what is going on? We are not here tonight to experience the latest and the newest. In truth, paying attention to the latest and newest item is a great way to know some things, but not this thing. Tonight we have come to experience the presence of God, the same God who has been around since the first moment of the creation and who will preside at its ending, the God whose power and might transcend anything we have ever known. We should run from that God but instead we flock to him. We come to him because he reveals himself not in his eternal and almighty power and stern judgment, but in his even greater attribute: His love. We flock to that manger not because we will find something new, but for the same reason we come home for the holidays, for the same reason we call these people family. We flock to the churches of Christendom on Christmas Eve because the message is so amazingly simple. God loves us. That child in a manger is nothing less than the gift of love. Humble and meek, he does not overpower us or threaten us, he loves us.

But John tells us something more. The love which is God, dwells within all who know his love. That love permeates our lives, and gives us an insight and a knowledge of God which the world cannot in any way give. It means that the gifts we will unwrap tonight or tomorrow, the affection we share, the charity we bestow, the joy we spread, and the kindness we show is all somehow connected to this. Not something new, but something ancient and divine, when we love, we know God. He literally lives in us. His love reaches its goal, its perfection, in the gift you give.

Matthew 1:18-25 – the birth of Jesus according to Matthew, told from the perspective of Joseph.

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

A couple of interesting things about this text. Matthew may have been dealing with a legal reality in the first century here. We know that the accusation was floating about that Jesus was illegitimate. Matthew seems to be establishing that Joseph legally took Jesus into his family. In that situation it was considered a slander or libel to publically assert that someone was illegitimate. He was legally the son of Joseph, irrespective of his actual parentage. Matthew may have couched his Gospel this way to stem that critique of Jesus’ parentage.

But of course the real message lies in the words of the angel. This child is of God and he is the savior of the world.

Of course the prophetic piece makes it a little odd. We do not know of anyone calling Jesus “Immanuel” but the whole Gospel witness is really about suggesting that he is in fact God among us. But as we mentioned in the discussion of the Isaiah text above, Matthew was giving us a big clue into the presence of Christ right now. His presence with the post resurrection community was essential to their community and its mission.

Luther said that there were three great miracles of Christmas. The first great miracle was the Virgin birth, never happen before or since. Even greater than this miracle was the incarnation. That God himself was in that babe lying in a manger defies all understanding. But the greatest miracle, according to Luther, was that Joseph actually believed any of this!

Sermon Theme: Immanuel (That the hearer would believe that God has made and kept his promises to His people. Jesus’ birth in a manger is but one of the promises and tonight he promises and delivers his presence among us.)

Something odd is happening. This night churches are full. There has not been some national calamity or some special day of thanksgiving or prayer proclaimed. But still they are full. Of course, the oddity of the situation is a little muted by the fact that the same thing happened last year on this day, and the year before that and before that. It perhaps has become so regular that

we have lost sight of just how amazing it is that people celebrate this season. Many merchants make their whole annual profit off the Christmas gift giving. But if you think of it, one might just wonder what all the fuss is about. The answer is rather simple, God made and kept a promise some two thousand years ago and we are still celebrating it. The birth of this child was foretold long before and God's people anxiously awaited it and finally the day came the virgin bore a son and named him Jesus, for he saved his people from their sins. He was the gracious presence of God for us.

This promise making and keeping God also has a promise to make and keep today. This is the other reason that many folks gather on this night. He is still doing this. He promises the presence of Jesus in your life too. Matthew points us to two places where Jesus declares his presence in our lives. The first is in chapter 18 of his excellent gospel. There Jesus tells us about forgiveness and he tells us that we must forgive. It is a hard thing to do, but we must, and then he makes a promise. Whenever two gather in my name, to forgive and love with my love, I am right there. I speak, I act, I love in their words and deeds. The second promise of his presence is of course in the last chapter of Matthew where he speaks of the mission to go and make disciples. Again he says: I am with you. That means when we are in his mission we are never alone. Our words become tools for his spirit to work. Our loving deeds to a neighbor are the presence of Christ to this world.

This night he has summoned his disciples to make a promise to them. God the great keeper of promises is with you. Go, then, forgive and love in his name and with him.

Nativity of our Lord – Christmas Midnight

Collect of the Day

O God, You make this most holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light. Grant that as we have known the mysteries of that Light on earth we may also come to the fullness of His joys in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Notice the emphasis on the mystery here and the goal of the incarnation event: that we may come to know the fullness of His joys in heaven. Those joys hang on this child in a manger. There is a strong sense of the now and the not yet in this collect. We know the mysteries, we see the light, but we also yearn for the dawn, the fullness of His joys in heaven.

Isaiah 9:2-7 (One of the great messianic prophecies in Isaiah)

¹ *But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;

those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.

³ You have multiplied the nation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

⁴ For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶ For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

One could preach a dozen sermons on this text. Simply take one of the names and reflect on it. In fact, that is a better approach than trying to tackle the whole thing. That would require just too much thought on the part of the exhausted preacher and the excited and celebratory congregant. "His name is Wonderful Counselor" would be a great sermon. We need counsel; we need the wisdom of God for our lives. The darkness of ignorance and our own sin needs that light. Delight it in tonight.

If we are gathering at midnight for this service, there is a very good chance that we are gathering for a candle-light service. That gives the preacher a natural opportunity to talk in the imagery of light which dominates the opening verses of this text. The tree is full of lights, all the candles in the advent wreath are lit, the service will close with each of us holding a little flame, a little light while we sing the praises of this babe born, this Savior come. We will blow the candles out, but the light of the world is not thus extinguished, either in us or through us.

Sermon Theme: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. That the hearer would rejoice in the light of Christ! Darkness comes in all sorts of shapes and forms. There is the darkness of personal tragedy. There is darkness in loneliness. There is a darkness which crowds around us when we open our 401K statement with fear and trepidation. There is a darkness of some terrible event done to you in the past or by you in the past. (I just watched Gran Torino with Clint Eastwood – it is a profane movie, but an interesting exploration of guilt. Eastwood plays a decorated Korean War vet whose Silver Star was awarded for what he knows was a war crime. I won't spoil it for you, but there is some really interesting atonement material in here.) There is a darkness which inhabits every life. Is yours in the relationship with some family member? Is yours in something else? It was to this darkened world that Jesus came those many years ago and to which he continually comes today.

The shepherds had a lonely dark job those many years ago. This was long before batteries and halogen lights. Their sky was ablaze with the distant light of stars, but if you have ever stood out on a dark wilderness night you know how small and insignificant that makes you feel, how lonely that cold and distant light can be. Suddenly their life was changed, a glorious light appeared, angels announced, and they hurried off to a stable and found in a manger a child. They ran from that encounter, no longer alone, but bursting with news they could not but share.

This Jesus comes today to this dark world. How does he shine tonight? What darkness does he dispel? Here is the time to find a real person, a real story. Reach into your darkness files and find a real person whose life has been changed. This could be a lost soul who has been turned around. It could be a very effective time to remember a member of the congregation who has died and whose life clearly is an occasion to celebrate and rejoice in the light of God.

The light of Christ shines in lots of dark places today. It shines in real lives in the hope which regular folks feel, the hope which we will symbolize with a little candle tonight which shines in the darkness. We will light a candle, sing a song, and the darkness will retreat. So to, God has demonstrated his loving power for this world tonight in a baby born in that manger. He will go to a cross and bear this world's sins and die for them.

Psalm 96

Oh sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!

² Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.

³ Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!

⁴ For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.

⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.

⁶ Splendor and majesty are before him;
 strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

⁷ Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
 ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!

⁸ Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
 bring an offering, and come into his courts!

⁹ Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;
 tremble before him, all the earth!

¹⁰ Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!
 Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
 he will judge the peoples with equity.”

¹¹ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
 let the sea roar, and all that fills it;

¹² let the field exult, and everything in it!

Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy

¹³ before the LORD, for he comes,
 for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness,
 and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Titus 2:11-14 (There are surprisingly few Christmas texts in the Epistles)

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Notice how Paul ties the first and second coming of Christ together here. There is always in the Christmas season a tinge of discord. The World wants to make it all fluffy and nice and bury the discord in a mound of wrapping paper in hopes that it will go away. When we are shopping, how often don't we hear the first verse of "What Child is This"? We never, it seems, hear the second verse with its edgy words about nail and spear piercing him through. But go through your Christmas carols and there is a decided thread that runs through these things, usually in the second or later verses, the one's Madison Avenue conveniently neglects.

Paul would have us know that this first coming has changed everything. The Grace of God appearing in the incarnation of Jesus trains us to renounce the world and passions of the flesh. It trains us to live self-controlled and upright lives as we wait for the appearance of our great God and Savior. But the news is not all "shape up" The Grace of God does act, and it not only

changes our lives, but it also redeems us from all lawlessness and purifies us to be a people of God. There is some pretty potent good news about just what that babe in a manger is up to.

The next words of Paul's text are perhaps worthy of mentioning here in a sermon study:

15Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you. *The preacher could do worse than to take that to heart, even on Christmas Eve.*

Sermon Theme: Hazardous Material – Handle with Care (That the hearer would believe that Jesus has come to work real change and do real things, not just be a babe in a manger but a force in their lives.)

Did you ever see the Christmas Story movie with the little boy who wanted a Red Ryder BB Gun? Everyone told him he would shoot his eye out with that thing. It was dangerous. Or did you ever get a chemistry set for Christmas, one of those old ones with real chemicals in it? The other day I tried to buy a snap together model at Toys R Us and they said they no longer sold them since some child somewhere had swallowed a piece and been harmed.

Tonight the biggest and the best Christmas present of all is given and it comes with something of a warning label for us. God is good, God is love, but don't ever think that God is safe. This Jesus who breaks into the history of the world does so with a mission and that mission is to totally transform and change your life. For sinners in a bind, that is good news, but for the comfortable who are getting ready to settle in for a week of bowl games in front of their new LED flat screen hi-definition Smart TV, it might be a little hazardous. He has come to transform the things you think are valuable, the goals of your life, the things you believe are most important. The world may well think you are odd if you listen to him. He might just soften your heart to the plight of a needy soul or transform the way you treat your spouse. Are you ready for that? He has come, He has a mission. He will not be deterred but will keep coming to you.

But there is good news in this too. The mission is for your good. He would purify you for heaven and give you a joy which does not fade like the gifts that are lying under your tree. He comes to make you zealous for good, to make you fit for heaven, to open your eyes to really see and to wait with an eager expectation for the day of his revelation. This child is not at all safe for us. Thank God – if God had given us what we wanted, we would shot our eye out anyway.

Luke 2:1-20 (The more familiar story of the birth of Jesus according to Luke, told through the eyes of Mary.)

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn

son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The Modern Credo: Veni, Vidi, Visa! I came, I saw, I purchased

Are the shepherds like us moderns – they worked all the time – they saw the Christ and returned to their flock, God had changed their jobs forever.

Several possible sermon themes struck a cord with those who discussed this with me.

1. *Incarnation*
2. *The Journey – Mary and Joseph returning to their homes like many of the folks who are in the pews this night.*
3. *The Angel’s announcement – Good news for all the earth – to us is born a Savior – God has acted on our behalf.*
4. *The Angelic Host sings: we sing with them.*
5. *The Shepherds are like us – they have come to see this child – their lives will never be the same. Now they tell the story and glorify the God who has saved them.*

This is the much more familiar story for us. The text breaks nicely into several sections and the preacher will likely want to focus on one of these. The angelic words are the easiest to preach and you might start there.

Of course the song of the angels is repeated by us regularly in worship, if you use a liturgical form. That sometimes is lost on folks and makes for an excellent reminder to those who only

come twice a year that there are actually services the rest of the year too. It is a way to tie things together well.

Please avoid the “homeless” motif for Mary and Joseph. The fact of the matter is that Joseph did not plan well. We have no indication that he was homeless. In fact later Matthew will tell us that they had a home in Bethlehem. One would presume that the whole stable thing was a temporary arrangement. The tradition is that the stable was a cave. This could be. It could also be that, with many homes in the ancient world, the stable was part of the house.

In the Mediterranean world many homes had areas for animals associated with them. The word “Inn” is something of a misnomer. It is quite likely that Joseph simply knocked on a house (of a relative?) and asked for a place to stay. Every room was full with all the other folks doing the same thing, the hospitable homeowner offered them what he had, a hastily vacated area in the space which was normally used for animals. This might have been part of the house.

You may also want to highlight the fact that shepherds were often considered poor witnesses and not often viewed as the most savory of characters. Jesus’ humility is absolute. He welcomes the praise of pretty scurvy people, even yours and mine! Look at the accompanying treatment of these texts by Luther – he makes a great deal of the humility of the shepherds.

Sermon Theme: The Love Letter from God – Luke 2:1-20. (That the Gospel of Christ’s Birth would comfort the sinner who has always wondered if he/she is good enough.)

He did not use FedEx, UPS or the Postal service on this one, but the humility of a woman and a virgin birth, born in a manger. But often the price of the gift and the beauty of the wrapping isn’t what made the difference. It is the relationship of the one who gave to the one who received.

How many of us parents have an ornament hanging on our tree with a picture of their toddler framed in a handmade star or some bit of second grade art sitting in china cabinet? Here, in humble wrapping is the gift from the one who made us and has never stopped loving us. God has been telling he loves us from that first experience in the garden, when he gently sought our first parents after they sinned. He loved his unruly people, often despite themselves. But his great love reaches its pinnacle in this manger tonight – God’s great love letter to us.

In our more honest moments of self-reflection lies a terrible temptation for us. We really are not worthy of God’s love and we might just start to believe that grim word more than God. Did any of us deserve the gifts of love our children gave us? Probably did not, but he or she loved, and that was that. Likewise God loves this tired old world and all its people. He loves them so much he actually becomes of them and he becomes one with them. He takes up tonight the flesh of a child so that he may run this human race on our behalf, because we were stumbling and falling in that path. He loves us so much he cannot bear to see us fall and to see us fail. He will join us even in our death. But that is not the end of this love letter. In his grave his love picks up our lifeless body and does not forget our all too quickly passing life, but he remembers us and loves us still. His participation in even our death on that Friday we call Good means that we have joined him in that Sunday we call Easter. His love will not be satisfied until we are where he is, and all our tears are dried and every life is joy.

You may want to allude to the Isaiah and Revelation passage here, as well to the Philippians 2 text in which Christ sets aside his Godhead and is found as a servant, obedient to death, even death on a cross.

This sermon could be introduced by asking if someone got a cool new gadget. You might think of this sermon as being comparable to reading through all the features on your new electronic device which are printed on the outside of the box. And you cannot wait to use it!

The Nativity of our Lord – Christmas Dawn *(This is the least likely service to be observed at its appointed time, but the preacher with a Christmas day service might well want to consider these readings in place of the other readings appointed for Christmas day.)*

Collect of the Day

Most merciful God, you gave your eternal Word to become incarnate of the pure Virgin. Grant your people grace to put away fleshly lusts, that they may be ready for Your visitation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Readings

Isaiah 62:10-12

¹⁰ Go through, go through the gates;
prepare the way for the people;
build up, build up the highway;
clear it of stones;
lift up a signal over the peoples.

¹¹ Behold, the LORD has proclaimed
to the end of the earth:
Say to the daughter of Zion,
“Behold, your salvation comes;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.”

¹² And they shall be called The Holy People,
The Redeemed of the LORD;
and you shall be called Sought Out,
A City Not Forsaken.

For the folks in Isaiah’s day, when the political fortunes of the country had deteriorated so far and would deteriorate even further in the days of exile, this must have sounded like the raving of a madman. The Gospel in contradicting sin will often appear that way to us. Who, after all, would call the events of Jesus’ crucifixion “Good Friday?” We do.

The preacher attracted to this beautiful text and wanting to proclaim it faithfully will want to focus on the strange juxtaposition of reality to the final verse in the reading. When Isaiah spoke the people of God were defeated and demoralized, hardly the picture of a Holy People which one would expect from that name. They had become a byword among the nations, an example of what happened when your gods abandoned you as the Assyrians and Babylonians rampaged at will across the Judean countryside and eventually conquered the city of Jerusalem. They hardly looked like a people redeemed but rather a people who had been sold into brutal slavery. If they were sought out, it was only for ridicule and derision. Jerusalem's empty streets and shattered temple mount hardly gave the impression of a city not forsaken.

God's word speaks likewise to us today. Our lives do not look holy, we bring on weariness and our pain to this place and God calls us his blessed children, the royalty of heaven. In the great exchange Christ takes our place and gives us his. Don't expect this to look like much, at least not yet. That day has not yet come, but trust it. God has worked it. The people of Israel did return from that exile, did rebuild that temple, and once more lived in the land which God had given and promised to them and their children.

Today Jesus has come and brings his recompense, his forgiveness, his mercy, his love, the very favor of God with him. Wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, he hardly looks the part but he has come to battle our ancient enemies on our behalf, foes which we could not conquer and before whom we were utterly helpless: death, sin, and devil. In the Judean desert, on a hill outside of Jerusalem, in an emptied tomb, and from his place at God's right hand today, he conquers them all for us. We are God's holy people, the redeemed of the Lord, a people sought out, and a city not forsaken. Jesus has come.

Psalm 98

¹ Oh sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things!

His right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.

² The LORD has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

³ He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.

⁴ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

⁵ Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!

⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!

⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!
⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together
⁹ before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

The preacher may want to use Isaac Watt's beautiful paraphrase of this psalm which you know as the hymn "Joy to the World" as the basis for a sermon.

Titus 3:4-7

⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

The themes of God's goodness and kindness coming down to us in Christmas are congenial to the gentle sermon which might just be what this day needs. After the frenetic preparation of the season, it might be time to rest in the goodness and kindness of God. Notice that God is the actor in all of this. He appears, he saves, he is merciful, he washes us in Baptism and renews us with the Holy Spirit. He pours this Spirit out in Christ. He justifies us by his grace and has names us in the will. We have not done a thing in this whole text other than simply be the object of his attention.

Come to me all you who are weary and heavily burdened, and I will give you rest – Jesus said those words to this generation I believe.

Luke 2:(1-14)15-20

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

See the notes for this reading above and the accompanying notes of Luther.

The Nativity of our Lord – Christmas Day

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, grant that the birth of Your only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free from the bondage of sin; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This may change this year because Christmas Day falls on Sunday, but normally this will most likely be the time you see your faithful. The big crowds of course tend to come out on Christmas Eve. That can make this a really special time. The birth is given to set us free from the bondage of sin. You cannot preach this one today as a future event and keep it gospel. It needs to be a “today” event. Christ has set us free.

The readings are theologically heavyweights. You will have judge both your ability to treat them adequately considering your time constraints and your people’s willingness on a festival day to listen to a sermon which seriously explores them. Check out the possibility for a lighter sermon in the Old Testament lesson notes.

Isaiah 52:7-10

⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news,
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

⁸ The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice;
together they sing for joy;
for eye to eye they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.

⁹ Break forth together into singing,
you waste places of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people;
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

¹⁰ The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

This is a great text to give meaning to the singing of Christmas carols. You might just dissect a carol for your sermon. Joy to the World is a great one for that. This carol has a great deal to commend it for a preacher who has a Christmas Day sermon. Many times the expectation is that you will have a different sermon for the morning than you had for the services the night before. That can be a lot to do, especially if things get a little hectic at home like they tend to be in this week. Verse 9 in this text could be a good way to simply introduce the text of a carol and let it preach for you. Sing it at the end of the sermon and you have a memorable and appropriate sermon, think of the carol as a freeze-dried sermon, just add a little water.

There are actually a number of them that would work and which are based on the readings for this day. If you want a little more challenge, go verse by verse through “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.” That is a theologically significant hymn. Another excellent choice might be “O Savior of our Fallen Race.” There is a very good chance that your people don’t know the tune to this, as it is usually in the hymnals as a medieval plainsong. If you don’t want to teach a challenging tune on Christmas Day, and I don’t recommend that, you can also sing it to ‘Puer Nobis’ the tune of “on Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry” and it works fairly well.

Of course a more familiar carol could be used too, but some of them are theologically a little fluffy. “Once in Royal David’s City” is a good one, but so are many of the carols.

Sermon Theme: Break forth into singing – my spirit rejoices in you! Joy To the World

Christmas songs have been around for a long time. Some of the earliest hymns in the hymnal are from the Christmas tide just check out Ambrose’s “Savior of the Nations Come” or “O Come O Come Emmanuel” which seems to have been written for the women of a medieval monastic community or “A Great and Mighty Wonder” which came from the pen of St Germanus who lived sometime in the 7th century and of course “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” which was written by Aurelius Prudentius Clemens who died about the year 413.

In the 1600’s Oliver Cromwell tried to outlaw Christmas. Like all puritans he was terribly afraid that someone, somewhere was having just a little fun. He also outlawed the singing of Christmas carols and that is what broke his little anti-fun program. The people could lose Christmas day services, but they would not give up their Christmas songs.

Another interesting historical note from the time, the song “The 12 Days of Christmas” was developed in this time when Catholic Christians were forced to teach their children their faith secretly. There is a secret code embedded in this. The four calling birds are the four gospels, the partridge in a pear tree is Christ on the cross, etc. There are a number of websites which will break the code or there is a wonderful children’s book which does it for you.

For the preacher who has worn himself out preaching sermons by the time he gets to Christmas Day, I have long recommended simply taking one of the Christmas hymns and letting it form the outline to your sermon. Here I suggest Joy to the World by Isaac Watts. Of course you will want to have something that takes your Christmas crowd a little deeper and this hymn has it: a strong ecological potential. The whole world rejoices. This song was written by Isaac Watts whose life is worthy of some study. He was the son of a rigid puritanical sort of preacher whose discipline included only singing the psalms. His son Isaac was charged with expanding the repertoire of songs based on the psalms. This is one of his more popular, but it was not written as a Christmas tune. It is based on Psalm 98, but mines material from several other places in scripture. Of particular note is that he picks up on the ecological note here. The whole creation has suffered under sin’s curse and now, in Christ, the whole of creation is freed.

If you are looking for more information about the writers of hymns, check out the Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion published by CPH and written by Fred Precht There may be a

version of it for the TLH as well and I have not heard if one is in the works for LSB (sorry about that).

Psalm 2

Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?

² The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,

³ “Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”

⁴ He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.

⁵ Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,

⁶ “As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”

⁷ I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.

⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.

⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.”

¹⁰ Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.

¹² Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

The Psalter seems to have two introductory Psalms. We are more familiar with the first of these with its opening line “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the way of wickedness...” Psalm 2 paints for us the picture of God in his glory, sitting upon his throne, laughing at the puny attempts of man. The kings of the earth are urged to kiss the Son. Of course this raises some serious church and state issues for us. The preacher will likely want to look at verses 7-9.

Hebrews 1:1-12 (this is a great text for preaching about the gift now given)

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”?

Or again,

“I will be to him a father,
and he shall be to me a son”?

⁶ And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,

“Let all God's angels worship him.”

⁷ Of the angels he says,

“He makes his angels winds,
and his ministers a flame of fire.”

⁸ But of the Son he says,

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.

⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

¹⁰ And,

“You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;

¹¹ they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment,

¹² like a robe you will roll them up,
like a garment they will be changed.

But you are the same,
and your years will have no end.”

Hebrews is a fascinating book with an incredibly deep message about Christology. The writer seems to be addressing a group with significant knowledge of Jewish temple rites and customs which has led many to conclude that the original audience were priests who were considering

abandoning the faith and returning to their former positions of prestige and honor in the Jewish community.

His primary argument seems to be that being a disciple of Jesus is actually higher than being a priest under the old covenant. This is because Jesus is that much greater than angels or Moses for that matter. He is the very thing to which Moses was imperfectly pointing with all the rituals of the Torah. In doing this we get an incredibly rich exploration of Christology. What is also amazing about this book is that we have no idea who wrote it. That means that the early church had at least one great theological thinker other than Paul who also wrote in this same time. What is so interesting is that we don't know his name. There are a pile of things we don't know about the early church which should make us a little hesitant about declaring that we want to do things like the early church did, whether that is the current house church movement or longing appeals to the unity of the early Church. (Corinth was hardly a unified place!)

This first part is asserting that Jesus is higher than the angels. This is actually a minor theme in the book, but it works well for the Christmas season. The basic argument of the whole book works off a traditional rhetorical device called "from the lesser to the greater." This is a basic comparison sort of argument we already see in the first several verses. The comparison is made about two things. In this case, God speaks to our parents and to us. Then it notes the difference of magnitude. Of old this was done through prophets, but now it is done through his Son, a vastly superior resource. In both instances God speaks, but now the speech has more authority.

The sermon on this text will want to speak of what has now changed that God has sent his son. Because Jesus has come with the authority of heaven we may now forgive sins and they are forgiven in heaven too. Because Jesus has come, we may baptize and the baptized become the children of God. Because God has sent his son, even the ancient and most rebellious evil beings have had to flee before him, the demons, the devil himself, even death.

That makes this celebration of this birth truly significant.

John 1:1-18 (ESV)

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in

his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

This is the mystery of the incarnation – we can look at it, understand what we are able but never really grasp it or able to tell it fully. John is very interested in some first article issues here. He wants to demonstrate the physicality of the Christ – God is not spiritual as opposed to a physical world. God loves the physical creation – Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, is the only access to the Father, you cannot get to God without going through the babe born in that stable. He is the contact point of this fallen world to God.

The second person of the Trinity was there at creation and now is here in this manger. This is God loving the world, all of it, not just your soul or your spirit, but all of you and the whole thing.

If you are looking for an interesting read about how Jesus shows up in the OT consider a text by a 19th century theologian named Hengstenberg. His book was “Christ in the Old Testament” and it is an interesting read. His interpretation of the near sacrifice of Isaac is most illuminating.

This last verse is quite interesting. From the Greek, we learn that Jesus has exegeted the Father. Just like we do with Jesus in a text, Jesus is the exegesis of the Father. Of course the great Christmas verse is #14 in which John says that Jesus pitched his tent among us. That is the literal translation of those words and the reason we get the description of the Tabernacle as the OT reading for this service.

This is a huge text. The preacher needs to beware its complexity, probably focus on one verse or two and really do them justice. Don't try to preach this whole thing, you will get a headache and the people will be confused. Besides, it comes up again, you will get another shot at it.

Have a great time, if you want to float a sermon theme off the group, I encourage you to send us something and share. If you have a great illustration, let's share and support one another!

Sermon Theme: Making God Known (That the hearer would rejoice in the revelation which God has given us in Christ – he has not come in wrath or the terror of judgment for us, but he has revealed his heart and it is filled with love.)

God must have a great sense of humor. Some have pointed to the camel or the rhinoceros as proof. But I think the Christmas story itself is something of a divine chuckle. It is not a joke on God, but really on us. We are so sure we know what God is like, and quite often we are afraid of

what we imagine. The recent end of the world scares which have afflicted us have not served to diminish our anxiety, but usually to raise it up.

But God has shown up and cooed from a manger at his mother. God has shown up and the angels came, but they did not bear great swords with which they meted out justice to the sinners, but they came with songs and alleluias, singing for humble shepherds on a Judean hillside. He has summoned wise men and received their gifts.

Don't think that this is a little thing. The world knows it, the enemy knows it. The forces of evil will take their best shot as Herod slaughters children, much like they have been slaughtered in a school in the streets of Aleppo and occasionally in the hallways of schools in our own country. We observed the anniversary of the Connecticut shooting just a little while ago. But Jesus will slip Herod's grasp. His death will be at the hands of a Roman murderer, but that cruel cross will be the culmination of this whole incarnational trip.

For God in this Christmas has revealed his very heart to us and we have been given to glimpse the very innards of God. Jesus has revealed him to us, and we have to be surprised. We don't find some wrathful and holy God smiting sinners, but we find that Jesus reveals his love. The sick are healed, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, because he is revealing God's fondest wish to us. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

The preacher this day wants to stand in front of that revelation with his parish and wonder. It completely baffles us and it is beautiful.